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Theodosius and the Relationship Between Church and State

During the reign of Theodosius, one major issue that arose was the relation between the church and state. Previously, the government held the power. Some key events occurred throughout Theodosius's reign that caused a power shift. During his reign as emperor, the emergence of the church as the underlying governing force began to arise throughout the Empire. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, is the main reason for this change. Theodosius was the ruler of the Roman Empire from 379 to 395 (King, 1960). Many events occurred throughout Theodosius' reign to explain the rise of the Catholic Church and Nicean Christianity.

Flavius Theodosius was born at Cauca in Spain in about 346 to Thermantia and Theodosius the Elder (Potter, 1994). Since Theodosius' father was a senior military officer, Theodosius was legally obliged to enter a military career. When Valentinian became ruler in AD 364, Valens was chosen to rule alongside his brother as co-Augustus. Valentinian chose to rule the less prosperous and more endangered west, while he appeared to leave the easier rule to his brother in the east (King, 1960). Valentinian adhered to the decisions at Nice (Stephens & Friell, 1995).

Valens was not to show the religious tolerance of his brother in the west. He was a vehement follower of the Arian branch of Christianity and actively persecuted the Catholic church. Some bishops were banished and other members of the church met their death (Potter, 1994). In AD 375, Valentinian came to his death. His death was attributed to either poisoning or an assassination. Upon the death of Valentinian in 375, Gratian's brother Valentinian II was declared emperor by his father's soldiers. Valens assumed the rank of senior Augustus over his nephews in the west. Gratian gained a decisive victory over the Alamanni in 378 at the Battle of Argentovaria (Williams & Friell, 1995). That same year, his uncle Valens was killed in the Battle of Adrianople against the Goths-making Gratian essentially ruler of the entire empire. He favored the Nicean Christian religion. Gratian invited Theodosius to take command of the Balkan army. As Valens had no successor, Gratian's appointment of Theodosius amounted to a de facto invitation for Theodosius to become co-Augustus for the East (Potter, 1994).

Theodosius had two sons, Arcadius and Honorius, and a daughter, Aelia Pulcheria, from his first wife Aelia Flaccilla. Both Aelia Flaccilla and Pulcheria died in 385(Grant, 2010). In 383, Gratian was killed in a rebellion. Theodosius then appointed his elder son, Arcadius, his co-ruler for the East. When Theodosius went to the East, he had no money or army. He was able to gain respect by handling the problems in the East. A major weakness in the Roman position after the defeat at Adrianpole was the recruiting of barbarians to fight against other barbarians. To reconstruct the Roman

Army of the West, Theodosius needed to find able bodied soldiers so he turned to the most capable men available which were barbarians recently settled in the Empire (Williams & Friell, 1995). This caused many problems because the newly recruited fighters had little or no loyalty to Theodosius or Rome.

During the autumn of 380 when serious illness threatened his life, Theodosius was baptized by Acholius, a Nicean Bishop, of Thessalonica (King, 1960). Two days after his first arrival in Constantinople on November 24, 380, Theodosius expelled the "Arian" bishop and appointed Meletius patriarch of Antioch (King, 1960). In 381, Theodosius summoned a new ecumenical council at Constantinople to repair the division between East and West on the basis of Nicean orthodoxy. The council defined orthodoxy, clarified jurisdictions of the state church of the Roman Empire, and ruled that Constantinople was second in precedence to Rome (Williams & Friell, 1995). Yet though, Theodosius had been fairly tolerant of the pagans in the beginning, because he needed the support of the influential pagan ruling class; he started to inhibit paganism in 381 when he reiterated Constantine's ban on sacrifice (King, 1960). Theodosius then issued a series of laws which seemed effectively to prohibit all pagan worship by forbidding visits to pagan sites of worship.

In April 390, the Roman military commander in command of Thessalonica had a popular charioteer arrested for a sexual offense. The town demanded the release of the charioteer and when the commander refused, a general mutiny ensued. This cost the commander and other Roman authorities their lives. As soon as Theodosius heard of the uprising, he ordered an immediate retaliation. The army units sent to Thessalonica acted as if they had captured a hostile city. Over 7,000 citizens were murdered. Although Theodosius changed his mind quickly and sent a message to cancel the massacre, the letter arrived too late (King, 1960).

During this time Ambrose was a close spiritual and political advisor to Theodosius. After hearing about the incident he was furious. After hearing of the massacre, Ambrose left Milan, which was the residence of Theodosius at that time. He left right away because he could not be seen publicly with Theodosius and did not want to deal with the situation. After the massacre, Theodosius received a private letter from Ambrose. The bishop reminded him how King David's sin had been forgiven by his repentance and his humbling himself and his offering of sacrifice (Cesare, 1996). Unless the Emperor repented, Ambrose could not offer the sacrifice in his presence. When the Emperor tried to enter a church in Milan where Ambrose was about to celebrate mass, the bishop stopped him and rebuked him for what he had done (King, 1960). Theodosius could do nothing but return to the palace weeping and sighing. Eight months had passed and Theodosius still sat in the palace moaning and sobbing (King, 1960). Theodosius's administrative official Rufinus volunteered to see the bishop and asked him to reconsider (Williams & Friell, 1995). Theodosius hesitantly agreed and followed Rufinus from a distance. Ambrose scolded and accused Rufinus for being compliant with the massacre. Ambrose readmitted the emperor to the Eucharist only after several months of penance and when he promoted a law, which in the case of death sentences would allow a thirty-day lag before the execution would be enforced. When Theodosius consented, it marked a new chapter in the history of church and state. For the first time, a secular ruler submitted to the church (King, 1960). Less than a century earlier, emperors were trying to wipe out the church. This incident showed the strong position of a bishop in the Western part of the empire, even when facing a strong emperor. The Massacre of Thessalonica was seen as a signal victory of Church over State.

Another situation in which Ambrose's power could be seen over the state was dealing with the Altar of Victory. The Altar of Victory was outside the Roman Senate House, in front a gold statue of the goddess of Victory. The altar had been removed and restored multiple times. In 382, Gratian removed the Altar of Victory again. After Gratian's death Symmachus, the Prefect of Rome and a Pagan, wrote to the new Emperor Valentinian II in 384 requesting the restoration of the altar (Williams & Friell, 1995). Symmachus' request was met with strong resistance by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Ambrose wrote a letter to Valentinian II that stated it is his business to defend religion and not superstition. He also warned Valentinian that if he did not listen, he will incur the censures of the church. During this time, Ambrose held a great deal of power over the young emperor so the altar was not restored. Further petitions were sent to Theodosius in 391 but were deflected as part of his suppression of the old pagan religions (Ambrose Letter 17a).

As emperor, Theodosius dramatically expanded Christian power at the expense of other religions and state itself. On February 27, 380, he declared "Catholic Christianity" the only legitimate imperial religion (Potter, 1994). His efforts as emperor allowed a closer configuration between church and state. Theodosius' motivation for doctrinal unity was both religious and political. This effectively outlawed all other religions and ended state support for other faiths. This linked

church and state at a time when the empire needed uniformity.

In a series of decrees called the "Theodosian decrees" he progressively declared that those Pagan feasts that had not yet been declared Christian ones were now to be workdays in 389(King, 1960). The apparent change of policy that resulted in the "Theodosian decrees" has often been credited to the increased influence of Ambrose.
Ironically, the new Christian Empire persecuted pagan religions. In the past, the empire murdered Christians for different reasons. Now that the Christians gained control of the government, they attempted to eliminate other faiths in the way they themselves had been targeted. Theodosius reiterated a ban on sacrifice He also destroyed pagan temples, used the army to suppress pagan militants, and cut all funding to pagans (King, 1960). The pagans did not handle this well because they were on the other end of the spectrum.

Shortly before his death, Theodosius defeated political enemies in the West. In 394, he stood as the sole emperor of the united Roman Empire (Williams & Friell, 1995). However, this did not last long. Theodosius died just five months later on January 17, 395, in Milan due to illness (King, 1960). Ambrose organized and managed Theodosius' lying state in Milan. Ambrose delivered a speech which detailed the suppression of heresy and paganism by Theodosius. Theodosius was buried in Constantinople on November 8, 395 (Williams & Friell, 1995). After his death, his sons Arcadius and Honorius inherited the East and West halves of the Roman Empire and it was never again re-united.

During his reign, Theodosius intimately linked church and state to the point in which church overruled emperors. Ambrose played a big role in this since he was a close political and spiritual advisor to Theodosius. Theodosius decided to link the two for unity and attempted to end church disputes. Ironically, Theodosius persecuted pagans but was reprimanded by the church for the massacre at Thessalonica. The situation at Thessalonica set the tone for the relationship between church and state. When Theodosius consented to Ambrose's rule, this was the first time that a secular ruler submitted to the church (King, 1960). Another victory for the church was when Valentinian and Theodosius did not restore the Altar of Victory after Symmachus continued to petition for it to be restored. Ambrose pressured Valentinian through a letter to not restore the Altar of Victory. The church's influence ultimately won this decisive battle against Symmachus and the pagans because of Ambrose's strong presence over Valentinian and Theodosius (King, 1960). As a result of these decisive victories for the church, the once underground religion ruled the Empire.

The church played a decisive role during the reign of Theodosius because of his faith in God and an afterworld. In the old days, most people were baptized on their death beds. This was done to cleanse their soul's right before entering the kingdom of God. Theodosius lived through his serious illness. Because of this, he thought that if he sinned he would go to hell because he had an immoral soul. After the massacre at Thessalonica, Theodosius realized he had made a major mistake. He was distraught because he thought he was going to hell because of the massacre. That is why Theodosius sought the guidance of Ambrose. Ambrose was trying to help Theodosius purify his soul. Both did not believe they held the power at the time. Ambrose and Theodosius felt as if they were helping each other. Since Theodosius wanted to be readmitted back to the church and clear his soul, he did what Ambrose said. Historically, this could be looked as if Theodosius allowed the church to take more control.

During Theodosius' reign, the churches supremacy over the state was a major accomplishment. Ambrose's influence and the idea to link the two for unity established the church during this era. During this time, Theodosius summoned a new ecumenical council at Constantinople to repair the East and West on the basis of Nicene Orthodoxy (Williams & Friell, 1995). He made the Catholic Church and Nicean Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire. While Theodosius was a great ruler, he was heavily influenced by Ambrose. He constantly wanted the acceptance of the church and after the massacre at Thessalonica to clear his conscience and soul and did just about anything to get reinstated. Theodosius came up with harsh new laws against the pagans and continued to persecute pagan religions. In the end, Theodosius was the turning point in the relationship between church and state. He was the last man to ever be the sole emperor of the Roman Empire.

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